



Crossing Over to Canaan

Gloria Ladson-Billings

Crossing Over to Canaan

The Journey of New Teachers
in Diverse Classrooms



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*For Jessica,
for whom Canaan is a real possibility*

Preface

As was true for many African Americans, an important part of my education took place in the black church. Every Sunday morning meant putting on my best clothes, getting a special hairdo, and spending almost four hours at White Rock Baptist Church in West Philadelphia. We always went to Sunday School at 9:30 A.M. and to Sunday morning services from 11:00 A.M. to 1:00 P.M. I do not think I was alone in experiencing a weird combination of boredom and fascination with the weekly going-to-church ritual.

Depending on the quality of one's Sunday School teacher, it was possible to learn quite a bit about the mystery of faith, even if it was difficult to understand the homiletic proclamations of the preacher. Sunday School teachers often told Bible stories in ways that made sense to children and young people. One of the stories that always puzzled me was that of Moses and the exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt.

I understood the miraculous burning bush, the various plagues that were visited upon Egypt, and the parting of the Red Sea. Indeed, Cecil B. DeMille helped me to see and understand them. What I could not understand was why, after all he had done to whip the children of Israel into shape, Moses was being denied the opportunity to lead them into Canaan. Instead, the younger, less-experienced Joshua was chosen to direct the crossing into Canaan. Why couldn't Moses go into the promised land?

Crossing Over to Canaan: The Metaphor

I probably do not have enough theological knowledge to understand the subtleties of biblical exegesis. But I do know how to recognize a good metaphor when I see one. The passing of leadership from the old to the young is what those Bible stories—and what *Crossing Over to Canaan*—is all about.

We are in the midst of spirited discussions in this country about teachers and their preparation. There are reasons to be pessimistic about the future of our schools. In the midst of this information age, fewer and fewer of our best and brightest students choose teaching as a career. Of those who do, only a small percentage want to teach in urban communities serving poor children of color.

This book is about that small number of prospective teachers who *want* to teach poor children of color. It is about a group of modern-day Joshuas who are excited about the possibilities for transformation that lie just beneath the surface of most urban communities.

As I did in my previous book, *The Dreamkeepers*, I have written this one in three voices—the voice of a teacher, a teacher educator, and a researcher. I reflect on my own early teaching career and the many mistakes I made. I reflect on my work with prospective teachers struggling to work effectively with diverse groups of students. And I attempt to systematically study the practice of novice teachers who are committed to principles of equity and social justice and high achievement for all students.

In this book I describe how prospective teachers who attempt to develop a culturally relevant pedagogy negotiate their first year. But the book is not about personalities. It is about a process—a process of change that can happen in a teacher education program.

Contents of the Book

Crossing Over to Canaan begins with an Introduction that describes my perspective on the state of teacher education in the United States. As one might imagine, my description is not particularly flattering. I explain what I see as a persistent resistance to change in teacher education that keeps the field in a reactive mode. Rather than innovate, teacher education tends to imitate. The book tells part of the story of an innovative teacher education program we call Teach for Diversity (TFD).

Chapter One focuses on the nature of teaching in the twenty-first century and the despair people seem to feel about trying to teach “these children.” In this chapter I reveal my inspiration for deciding to focus on novice teachers as a part of the solution to invigorating teaching and supporting success in urban schools.

Chapter Two introduces the novice teachers who agreed to participate in this study. As I stated, I did not attempt to focus on the teachers in great detail, lest the reader become seduced by their individual personality traits. I attempted instead to tell a bit about the teachers’ backgrounds and how they came to make the decision to participate in a teacher education program focused on diversity, equity, and social justice.

Chapter Three describes the first of three propositions that support culturally relevant teaching—academic achievement. In this chapter I describe how the novice teachers attempted to take up the academic responsibilities of teaching. They were all bright, knowledgeable young women who wanted to do stimulating, creative things in the classroom. However, their foremost concern was whether or not students were learning, not whether they were being entertained.

Chapter Four addresses the concept of cultural competence. The novice teachers understood that students of color may become alienated from the schooling process because schooling often asks children to be something or someone other than who they really are. It asks them to use language other than the one they come to school with. It asks them to dismiss their community and cultural knowledge. It erases things that the students hold dear. The novice teachers were attempting to recruit the students' cultural knowledge as a vehicle for learning, as well as for understanding how their own cultural background provide a very specific lens for seeing the world.

Chapter Five explores the citizenship function of teaching in public schools. It describes aspects of the community service portion of the teacher education program, as well as the novice teachers' attempts at integrating social justice and civic participation activities into their curriculum.

Chapter Six analyzes some of the shortcomings of the TFD program and creates a vision of a teacher education program that I compare to a promised land. This vision is culled from elements of a variety of teacher education programs I have observed or read about. The chapter offers some cautionary notes to teacher educators about the difficulty of maintaining the effort to innovate in teacher education. However, I trust that it does not act as a deterrent to energetic and creative colleagues who are committed to a transformative agenda for teaching and teacher education.

I have included two appendixes at the end of the book. One describes the methodology employed in the study; the other provides a more detailed description of the TFD program. I include them because I invite teachers, teacher educators, administrators, and qualitative researchers to participate in similar research and practice activities. Ultimately, I want us all to find a way to cross over to Canaan.

Acknowledgments

I have not yet figured out how to do research by myself. Once again I must acknowledge the students, teachers, colleagues, friends, and family who made this effort possible. First, I want to thank the prospective teachers who were willing to allow me to make public their thoughts and actions as a way to help others understand the struggles of new teachers. I am forever in their debt.

Second, I thank those colleagues who were co-laborers in our effort to develop a teacher education program that directly confronted issues of diversity and difference. Chief among them are Mary Louise Gomez, Ken Zeichner, Tom Popkewitz, Mimi Bloch, Carl Grant, Beth Graue, Pat Enciso, Linda Stanley, Jim Stewart, and Mariamne Whatley. At one time or another I came crying to their doors for support and guidance throughout this project.

Third, I must thank the “underground railroad” of scholars who challenge my thinking and ensure that I uphold the high standards of those who have come before—those who traveled up the “rough side of the mountain.” I offer specific thanks to Joyce King, Mwalimu Shujaa, Jacqueline Irvine, and Carol Lee.

Finally, I must acknowledge the love and support of my family. Projects such as these translate into many missed dinners, school performances, and sporting events—the glue that holds many families together. My husband, Charles, and daughter,

Jessica, carried on the business of being a family when I was busy spending time with a tape recorder, piles of notes, and the computer.

With this amount of love and support it would seem that this should be a perfect book. I am sure that it is not. However, the mistakes are mine alone and cannot be attributed to any of those who have helped me.

*Madison, Wisconsin
February 2001*

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The Author

Gloria Ladson-Billings is a professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a senior fellow in urban education at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. Her research interests concern the relationship between culture and schooling, particularly successful teaching and learning for African American students. Her publications include *Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994), the *Dictionary of Multicultural Education*, with Carl A. Grant (Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1997), and numerous journal articles and book chapters. She is currently the editor of the Teaching, Learning and Human Development section of the *American Educational Research Journal* and a member of several editorial boards, including *Urban Education*, *Educational Policy*, and *The Journal of Negro Education*. She currently serves as member-at-large on the American Education Research Association Council.

Ladson-Billings has won numerous awards for her scholarship, including the 1989–90 National Academy of Education Spencer Post Doctoral Fellowship; the Early Career Contribution Award (1995) of the Committee on the Role and Status of Minorities in the American Educational Research Association (AERA); the Multicultural Research Award (1995) from the National Association of Multicultural Education; the

Palmer O. Johnson Award (1996) for an outstanding article appearing in an AERA-sponsored publication; the Mary Ann Raywid Award (1997) from the Society of Professors of Education; and the H. I. Romnes Award (1998) for outstanding research potential from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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